

Coaching Advice on Acing Seven Common Interview Questions

Ready for Hire: Interviewing Strategies to Land a Job

This handout was to be shared at the PCMEA/collegiate session of the PMEA Spring Conference on 4/23/20 by Paul K. Fox, PMEA Retired Member Coordinator and Chair of Council for Teacher Training, Recruitment, and Retention
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Interviews involve the “art and science” of public relations, research, marketing your “personal brand,” and selling yourself. In short, the more prepared you are, the better. The questions and commentary below will serve as areas you can study, review, and approach using that familiar process of a good musician—*practice, practice, practice!*

During past sessions at the PMEA spring conferences, members of the “Ready to Hire” mock interview panel distributed handouts sharing their ideas and “tools and techniques” of suggestions for successful job screenings and “landing a job!” This is an excerpt of the blogpost at <https://paulfox.blog/2020/01/26/more-on-teacher-interviews/>. My past articles include:

- “Job Interview Playbook – Directing a Showstopping Performance”
<https://paulkfoxusc.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/job-interview-playbook-pkfox-040419.pdf>
- “A to Z Job Interview Checklist”
<https://paulkfoxusc.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/a-to-z-job-interview-checklist-040419.pdf>
- “Marketing Your Professionalism”
<https://paulkfoxusc.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/marketing-your-professionalism-pmea-042117.pdf>.

Files from past PMEA workshops may be downloaded and read from <https://paulfox.blog/2019/04/03/interviews/> or this QR Code. ⇨



What other assistance can we offer on this topic? How about some reflection and specific “coaching” in the formation of thoughtful answers to seven commonly asked employment interview questions? These are tips from “the experts,” human resource staff, interviewers, supervisors, etc. We give each resource “the podium” and “the baton” to offer their perspective in the triumphs, pitfalls, and pratfalls of frequently observed interviewee responses. Follow-up by reading the entire article posted at each link.

Many of these suggestions are geared to “general education” interviews, but you can apply them to whatever specialty or grade level to which you are applying. After all, the person sitting at the other side of the desk is probably an administrator or director of curriculum, not a current/former music teacher or someone who truly *knows* the arts.

Again, be sure to visit each website... All told, there are more than 108 sample questions and responses in these collections below! Need any additional advice? Please peruse articles at <https://paulfox.blog/becoming-a-music-educator/>.

1. WHAT IS YOUR TEACHING PHILOSOPHY?

Teacher interview questions like this ask, “Are you a good fit for our school?” It’s the teaching equivalent of “tell me about yourself.” But — Don’t answer elementary teacher interview questions for an unstructured school with, “I believe in structured learning.” Take the time to learn the school’s philosophy before the interview.

Example answer: *“I believe in teaching to each student’s passion. For instance, in one kindergarten class, my students had trouble with punctuation. I observed that one student, Mary, suddenly got excited about apostrophes. I fueled her passion with a big book on punctuation. Her enthusiasm was contagious, and soon the entire class was asking bright and animated questions. Whenever possible, I try to deliver structured lessons in an unstructured way like this.”*

That answer uses the S.T.A.R. approach to educator interview questions. It shows a Situation, a Task, an Action, and a Result.

— “25 Teacher Interview Questions and Answers” by Tom Gerencer at <https://zety.com/blog/teacher-interview-questions>

This is from the Zety “career toolbox” website. They also offer an outstanding app to “build” a resume, CV, and cover letter, all with excellent examples.

2. WHY DO YOU WANT TO BE A TEACHER/WORK WITH CHILDREN?

You have to know who you are as an individual and as an educator, and you have to know what you can bring to the school... This question gets to the heart of that self-awareness and passion. The interviewer wants to know: What drew you to this field, specifically?

How to answer it: *It’s obvious of course, but you don’t want to say, “Summer vacations!” This should be easy to answer simply because there’s probably something you can think of that made you want to get into education. Maybe you love teaching your friends new things, or are a facts wizard bursting with knowledge, or love connecting with children. Focus not just on what you like about teaching but also on what you can... bring to the table.*

For example, you might say: *“I really admired my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Kim, when I was younger, and even after I left her class, I still felt myself drawn to her for advice and guidance over the years. It’s that sense of warmth and acceptance she provided me that inspired me to become a teacher. I want to be that person others can lean on as they navigate the often-times tough waters of growing up.”*

— “15 Common Questions Asked in a Teacher Interview (and How to Answer Them With Ease)” by Alyse Kalish at <https://www.themuse.com/advice/interview-questions-for-teachers-answers>

In addition, the site above shares several important pointers from Calvin Brown, Senior Recruiter at AlignStaffing, an education staffing firm, and Dan Swartz, Managing Director at Resolve Talent Consulting, LLC, a firm that specializes in education recruitment. This reaffirms the theme of the blogpost “S Is for Storytelling at Interviews” <https://paulkfoxusc.wordpress.com/2015/08/02/when-it-comes-to-getting-a-job-s-is-for-successful-storytelling/>

“If you have a situation or a story with a great outcome, absolutely share [it],” says Brown. “Stories are also great ways to highlight your expertise and skill set if you don’t come with a traditional background in education.” Swartz adds, “Even if you’re not a teacher with experience, you can still highlight how you go about your work by giving past examples and scenarios of engaging others.”

3. HOW WOULD YOU HANDLE A DIFFICULT STUDENT?

Mary Findley, Senior Teacher Success Manager at Skillshare, former Teach for America Core Member and elementary school teacher, suggests this scenario and answer:

“When students are disengaged, it’s either because the content’s too challenging, it’s too easy, or there could be some outside-of-school factors,” explains Findley. A good answer delves into figuring out the cause, as that’s often the most important step.

Then, your response should show that “you’re meeting the student where they’re at and building on their strengths,” she says. It should also emphasize that you’re “collaboratively discussing” solutions with the student rather than ordering them around. If you have an example story to tell, that’s a great way to state your case.

You could say: *“For me, the first step would be to pull them aside and address the issue privately. My biggest questions would be about deciphering what might be the root cause of this student’s bad behavior. Once I know what may be contributing to their difficulty, I really try to work with them to come up with a solution. I used this strategy in my last classroom, where I had a student who couldn’t seem to stay in his seat during lessons. We talked about how his behavior affected the rest of the class and why he kept moving around, and we agreed that when he was feeling really anxious he could raise his hand and I’d let him take a lap around the classroom, but only when it was appropriate. I also decided to make some of my lessons more active and hands-on so that other students could benefit from getting out of their seats every once in a while.”*

— “15 Common Questions Asked in a Teacher Interview (and How to Answer Them with Ease)” by Alyse Kalish <https://www.themuse.com/advice/interview-questions-for-teachers-answers>

4. HOW DO YOU INCORPORATE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN YOUR LESSONS?

Many states and districts have added requirements for social-emotional learning into their standards. Explain how you will not only tend to the academic needs of your students but tie in lessons that satisfy the core SEL competencies. Describe how you will help students build their self- and social-awareness skills, how you will support them in building relationships, and how you will give them the skills to make responsible decisions.

— “18 Interview Questions Every Teacher Must Be Able to Answer” by Brandie Freeman <https://www.weareteachers.com/most-common-teacher-interview-questions/>

5. HOW WILL YOU MEET THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS IN YOUR CLASS WHO ARE ADVANCED OR SAY THEY’RE BORED? and 6. HOW WILL YOU ENGAGE RELUCTANT LEARNERS?

School leaders don’t want to hear canned responses about how you can differentiate; they want you to give some concrete answers and support your ideas. Perhaps you help get kids prepared for scholastic competitions once they’ve mastered the standard... Maybe you offer more advanced poetry schemes for your English classes or alternate problem-solving methods for your math students. Whatever it is, make sure that you express the importance that all students are engaged, even the ones that are already sure to pass the state standardized test.

Teaching in an age when we must compete with Fortnite, Snapchat, and other forms of instant entertainment makes this question valid and necessary. How will you keep students’ heads off their desks, their pencils in their hands, and their phones in their pockets? Share specific incentive policies, engaging lessons you’ve used, or ways you’ve built relationships to keep students on task. An anecdote of how a past student (remember to protect privacy) that you taught was turned on to your subject because of your influence would also help your credibility here.

— “18 Interview Questions Every Teacher Must Be Able to Answer” by Brandie Freeman <https://www.weareteachers.com/most-common-teacher-interview-questions/>

7. WHAT ARE YOUR GREATEST WEAKNESSES?

Likely considered as one of the “trick” or “unfair” questions by many, you should still be ready for it. One of the keys to sounding sincere is to personalize your response, and provide specific examples of the “problem,” step-by-step self-improvement goals, and evidence of positive growth and progress.

At some point during the interview process, you may be asked to describe your personal strengths and weaknesses. Many job candidates are unsure about how to approach this question. However, by establishing the appropriate context, you can give hiring managers an honest, thoughtful answer that highlights both your self-awareness and professionalism.

Preparing ahead of time for this question is a valuable use of your time before the interview. Even if you aren't asked about your strengths and weaknesses specifically, scripting out your response to this common question will give you a candid yet compelling description of what you bring to the table and how you wish to grow in the future.

Because we all have weaknesses but rarely want to admit to them, it's best to begin with a truthful answer and build your script from there. Select an answer that a hiring manager would not consider to be essential qualities or skills for the position as well as qualities that you are actively improving.

Some examples of weaknesses include:

- *Disorganized*
- *Self-Critical/Sensitive*
- *Perfectionism (Note: this can be a strength in many roles, so be sure you have an example of how perfectionism can be a problem to demonstrate that you've thought deeply about this trait)*
- *Shy/Not adept at public speaking*
- *Competitive (Note: Similar to perfectionism, this can be a strength)*
- *Limited experience in a non-essential skill (especially if obvious on your resume)*
- *Not skilled at delegating tasks*
- *Take on too much responsibility*
- *Not detail-oriented/Too detail-oriented*
- *Not comfortable taking risks*
- *Too focused/Lack of focus*

Example weakness: Perfectionism

“I tend to be a perfectionist and can linger on the details of a project which can threaten deadlines. Early on in my career, when I worked for ABC Inc., that very thing happened. I was laboring over the details and in turn, caused my manager to be stressed when I almost missed the deadline on my deliverables. I learned the hard way back then, but I did learn. Today I'm always aware of how what I'm doing affects my team and management. I've learned how to find the balance between perfect and very good and being timely.”

Example weakness: Difficulty with an area of expertise

“Math wasn't my strongest subject in school. To be honest, as a student, I didn't understand how it would be applicable in my adult life. Within a few years of being in the working world, though, I realized that I wanted to take my career in a more analytical direction. At first, I wasn't sure where to begin, but I found some free online courses that refreshed the important basics for me. In my most recent job, this new foundation has enabled me to do my own goal setting and tracking. Actually, getting over the math anxiety I had when I was younger has been incredibly empowering.”

— “50 Teacher Interview Questions and Answers to Help You Prepare” from *Indeed.com*
<https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/interviewing/teacher-interview-questions>

Mock Interview Sample Candidate Assessment Form

Slippery Rock University

March 23, 2020

TEACHING ABILITY: Demonstrates an appropriate knowledge of content and pedagogy
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conveys ideas and information clearly? 2. Provides reasonable examples of effective lesson-planning, instructional strategies, and/or student assessment? 3. Makes content meaningful to students in the district? 4. Sets concrete, ambitious goals for student achievement? 5. Addresses the multiple and varied needs of students in the classroom? 6. Focuses on achieving results with students? 7. Indicates confidence that all students should be held to high standards? 8. Maintains high expectations for students when confronted with setbacks; continues to focus on the students' academic success? 9. Reflects on successes and failures?
CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT: Demonstrates ability to deal effectively with negative behavior
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Assumes accountability for classroom environment and culture? 11. Conveys reasonable understanding of potential challenges involved in teaching in a high need school? 12. Demonstrates ability to deal effectively with negative student behavior? 13. Persists in offering viable or realistic strategies to deal with classroom management challenges? 14. Remains productive and focused when faced with challenges? 15. Conveys willingness to try multiple strategies or something new when things change or when confronted with challenges? 16. Displays willingness to adapt classroom management style to meet the particular needs or culture of a school?
SCHOOL FIT: Displays skills and needs for development that would be a good fit for the school.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 17. Interacts with interviewer in appropriate and professional manner? 18. Respects the opinion of others? 19. Recognizes that families impact student performance? 20. Creates strategies of positive relations with administrators, faculty, parents, and students? 21. Expresses personal and professional expectations and/or preferences that are in line with the school culture? 22. Demonstrates interests and skills that match the school's culture and needs? 23. Interacts appropriately with supervisors, colleagues, parents, and students?
IMPRESSIONS: Displays professionalism in appearance, attitude, body language, and communications.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 24. Provides a resume, portfolio, and/or business card with access to his/her website, that are neat, professional, and free of errors? 25. Arrives early (10-15 minutes), exhibits he/she is well-prepared, and notifies office personnel of their presence? 26. Greets interviewer(s) in a positive and professional manner, builds rapport, and demonstrates an open-minded, poised, engaging, enthusiastic, patient, and helpful attitude throughout the interview? 27. Refrains from using cell phone or other distractions during interview except if asked to share digital portfolio? 28. Wears professional attire (fits well, clean and ironed), shoes are polished, and nails are clean/well-trimmed? 29. For women, skirts are at the appropriate length (knee-high or just above the knee) and blouses fit well, and necklines are not low-cut or overly revealing? 30. For men, moustaches and beards are neatly trimmed? 31. Avoids wearing excessive jewelry, cologne or perfume, and piercings/tattoos are hidden/not distracting? 32. Shows evidence of researching school and is clear on the details of the position? 33. Demonstrates awareness of the job by relating examples of his/her skills and experience for the position? 34. Maintains good eye contact and proper posture throughout the interview? 35. Responds to questions in a clear, concise, and well-paced manner using grammatically correct terms? 36. Responds with answers that are thoughtful, well-constructed, confident, and genuine? 37. Refrains from interrupting the interviewer while he/she is speaking? 38. Refrains from use of "verbal clutter" (too many long run-on sentences), "bird walking" (changing the subject or irrelevant/unclear responses), any form of fidgeting (tapping foot or fingers, wiggling in chair, etc.), touching hair, nose, mouth, etc.), or saying "um" or "ah" or "Like?" 39. Conveys interest in position and appreciation for offering the interview? 40. Follow-ups with a thank-you to the interviewer or job screening committee?
RATINGS: E = Exemplary FA = Fully Acceptable NFA = Not Fully Acceptable

- A. Tell us something about yourself... your strengths, weaknesses, and goals for the future.
- B. Who had the greatest influence on you becoming a music teacher and why?
- C. What are the most important qualities of an outstanding music educator?
- D. Describe a successful lesson plan you have developed.
- E. What classroom/rehearsal management techniques do you use and how would you handle misbehavior?
- F. How will you accommodate students with special needs or varied interests in your music program?
- G. How would you recruit/encourage students and "grow" interest and participation in the music program?
- H. Describe your approach to introducing a musical concept: singing matching pitches, keeping a steady beat, improvisation, tuning an instrument, vocal breath support/singing posture, theme and variation, etc.

Comments: *Looking for these “good” things*

- a. Motivation and sincerity: “a good fit,” true desire for the job, and “doing what it takes”
- b. Empathy, sensitivity, rapport with interviewer
- c. Goals: well-thought vision/mission/philosophy, and “professional development for life”
- d. Child-centered focus
- e. Depth of understanding, knowledge of pedagogy, use of educational terminology
- f. Modeling of the four C’s: be calm, concise, congenial, and caring throughout the interview
- g. Storytelling of successes – specific anecdotes
- h. Flexibility, versatility, adaptability, “landing on your feet,” good problem solving



Hopefully not seeing too many of these “not-so-good things”

- i. Lack of organization, preparedness, documentation (if this was a real interview, did you bring your resume, portfolio, business card with access to your professional website?)
- j. Showing of nerves, talking too fast, fidgeting, “ahh” – “uh” – “Like...”
- k. “Bird walking,” verbal clutter, lack of clarity in answers
- l. Unsubstantiated, unsupported, slanted or “opinionated” statements
- m. Going overboard (offering too much information)

How to “ace” your job interview

- **Attitude:** appearances of calm, positive and helpful mood, grace, enthusiasm, self-confidence/poise but no arrogance, sincerity, respect, modeling attributes of a team player (skills of collaboration) but also a leader and innovator
- **Speech:** qualities of tone, diction, volume, clarity, speed, expressivity, and pacing (appropriate wait-time and spacing between questions/answers)
- **Language:** use of professional terminology, varied and educated vocabulary, avoidance of weak words that suggest a lack of conviction (“I feel like” or “sort of” or “kind of”), avoidance of verbal clutter and repetitive exclamations (“ahhh” or “umm” or “like”)
- **Body language:** posture, eye contact, 15% angle to interviewer, smiling, strong handshake, positive demeanor, avoidance of fidgeting or “ticks” that reflect nervousness like clenching hands, looking down, touching face or hair, tapping pencil/papers
- **“On topic:”** focus, relevance, careful listening and thoughtful responses to interviewers’ questions, avoidance of unsubstantiated or unsupported statements, rambling, or “bird walking”
- **Preparation:** model of a knowledgeable and skillful candidate, organization (distribution of resume/portfolio), personal examples/stories of strengths and experiences, research of the program and asking of questions to the interviewer

Raising the bar further: effective teachers...

Score HIGH on

- Cooperation
- Student engagement
- Monitoring learning
- Optimism
- Pacing
- Promoting self-sufficiency
- Spontaneity
- Structuring

Score LOW on

- Abruptness
- Belittling
- Counting hours (“clock punching”)
- Defiance
- Illogical statements
- Mood swings
- Oneness (treating group as “one”)
- Recognition-seeking

Source: “The California BTES – Overview of the Ethnographic Study” by David Berliner and William Tikunoff